

Analytical Paper | February 2022

# Al-Mahra:

Another Theatre of Tussles in  
the Complicated Yemeni War

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**Talking** about Al-Mahra brings to mind thoughts about mountain chains and the golden sand dunes along the road to it towards eastern South Yemen.

This governorate, which remained neglected and forgotten for decades, became today the main focus of regional and international actors. Since the beginning of the civil war in Yemen in 2014, Al-Mahra has remained away from the military confrontations and enjoyed relative stability except for some occasional tensions supported by different local and regional competing parties.

Al-Mahra, located in the eastern part of South Yemen, is the second biggest governorate after Hadramout, in terms of area and it is 858 km away from the capital Aden<sup>1</sup>. It was the least densely populated provinces before being flooded with a IDPs after 2015. Furthermore, it is divided into 9 districts with a total area of 67,297 km<sup>2</sup> including its central city of Al-Ghaydah. It is strategically important as it borders the Rub' Al-Khali Desert (Empty Quarter) from the north, the Hadramout from the west, the Arabian Sea from the south and Oman from the east<sup>2</sup>.

Al-Mahra's people speak "Mahri" which is dated back to thousands of years in addition to Arabic. Mahri is considered one of the modern southern-eastern Arabic division and considered by researchers and linguists as a primitive Semitic language and the most pure among Semitic languages due to its isolation<sup>3</sup>.

Al-Mahra has acted as a trade route and an artery to transfer goods following closing air and land crossings due to the war. It has been the pathway for those who fled from the hellish war to Oman and then to other countries<sup>4</sup>. KSA allowed only the access of those who have official residency or have direct or indirect connections with the internationally-recognized Hadi Government.

This paper highlights the trajectories of the local scene in Al-Mahra with all its political and military levels, in a narrative way which reflects the local and regional impact and how some Mahri multilateral tribal figures have been involved in the tussles of the regional competition.

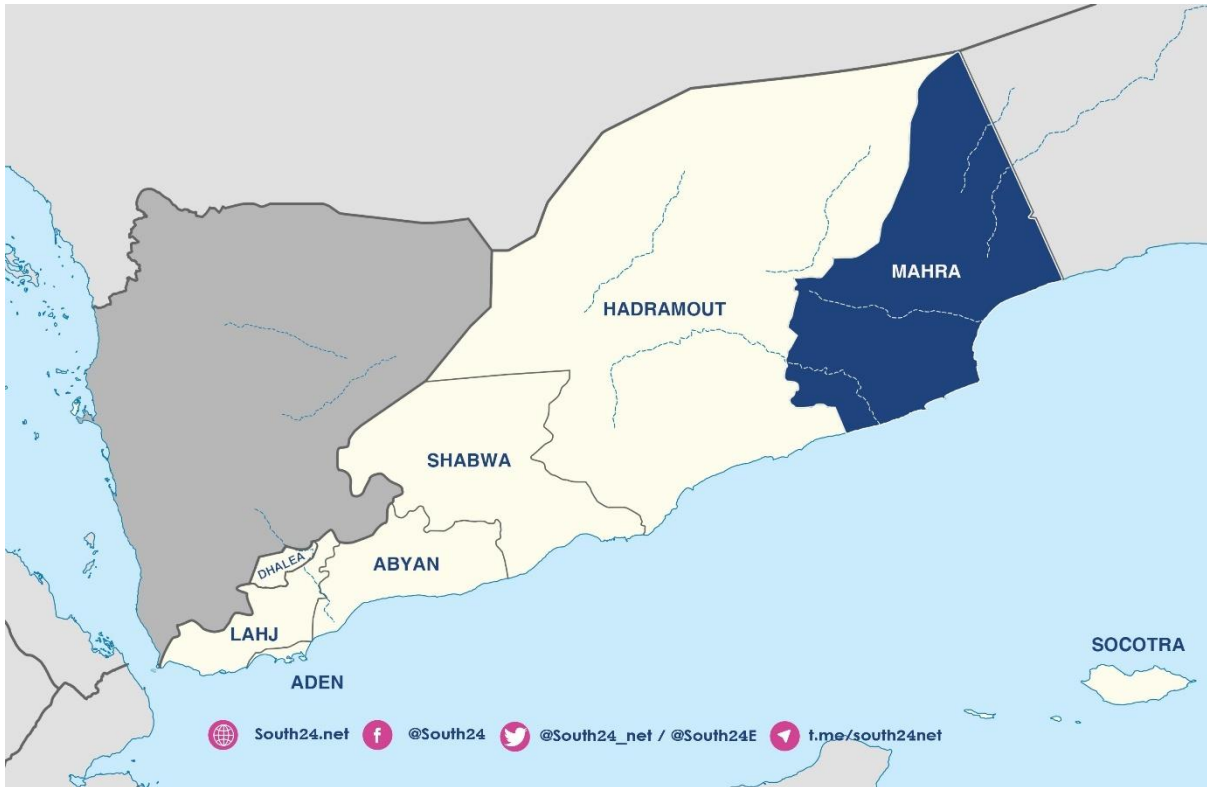
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<sup>1</sup> Aden — Al Ghaydah, distance between cities (km, mi), Driving Directions, Road ([toponavi.com](http://toponavi.com))

<sup>2</sup> The National Information Center, an overview of Al Mahra Governorate ([yemen-nic.info](http://yemen-nic.info))

<sup>3</sup> Jamal Schniter, Mahri is a Rooted Language.. From oral to Keyboard | Independent Arabia ([independentarabia.com](http://independentarabia.com))

<sup>4</sup> The Author of the Paper is one of those who left through Al Ghayda and then Oman by land in June 2015, while the Saudi-Yemeni border was closed to thousands of Yemenis, some of whom remained stranded for weeks in front of the "Al-Twal and Al-Wadi'a" border crossings, hoping to get out. Later, they headed to the Shahan and Sarfeet border crossings between Al Mahra and Amman. However, Oman used to give those who entered its territory only one week to cross into any other country before asking them to leave immediately, including those who were not accepted from other countries, and return them to Yemen.



The map of Southern governorate emphasizing Al-Mahra (Source: South24)

## The general scene

In reality, all eyes began to turn to Al-Mahra on Nov 24<sup>th</sup> 2017, as a state of resentment and initial refusal prevailed against the presence of foreign forces, especially in light of being far from the war frontlines.

However, some Mahri tribes welcomed the Saudi presence which was initially justified as a way to make some "reforms" in the governorate including developing Al-Ghaydah Airport, the place in which the Saudi forces were based to carry different military operations and activities, especially as it is the biggest local airport whose areas is 26 km<sup>2</sup> according to official estimates<sup>5</sup>.

However, the major reason behind the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra is confronting the phenomenon of smuggling weapons to the Houthis through Al-Mahra's official crossings according to statements issued by former Governor "Mohammed Abdullah"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> An investigation into the details of the arrival of the Saudi forces to Al Mahra and the transformation of Al Ghaydah Airport into a military base | Al Mahra Post ([almahrahpost.com](http://almahrahpost.com))

<sup>6</sup> Minister of State Bin Kedah talks about the Saudi presence in Al Mahra and the scenes of his house arrest in Riyadh, Al Mahra Post "interview"

On Nov 27<sup>th</sup> 2017, two days after the Saudi forces entered Al-Mahra, President Hadi appointed “Rajeh Saeed Bakrit” as Al-Mahra’s new governor instead of Bin Kedah who became a Minister of State<sup>7</sup>. Bin Kedah was the last governor for Al-Mahra during the former Southern state. He sought asylum in Oman after the 1994 War and gained Omani citizenship<sup>8</sup>.

Some considered the impeachment decision was due to Saudi interference in light of the close ties between Bakrit and the KSA while Bin Kedah adopted an approach that opposed the Saudi presence. He kept criticizing that even after his dismissal. His rejection emerged through the lack of direct coordination between him, as a local authority, and the Saudi troops in the governorate, as the Saudi side just coordinated with the Yemeni Presidency.

This pushed some of the Mahri tribes to form what they called, the “Peaceful Sit-in Committee of Al-Mahra People” in June 2018 led by the tribal sheikh “Amer Saeed Kalashat” who died in late April 2021, and succeeded by the tribal sheikh “Ali Salem Al-Huraizi”. The committee led grass root protests against the Saudi military presence in the governorate and is accused by some parties as receiving funds from Oman and Qatar. Its most important demands included handing over the maritime and land crossings to the local authority and the exit of the Saudi forces from Al-Mahra.

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On the other hand, several Mahri tribes supported and endorsed the Arab Coalition's efforts to counter smuggling activities in Al-Mahra despite their initial rejection of the Saudi presence<sup>9</sup>. This includes the prominent tribal sheikh “Abdullah bin Issa Al Afrar” the son of Al-Mahra’s last Sultanate and a member of the STC Presidency. Al Afrar also is the Head of the “General Council for the People of Mahra and Socotra” which was founded in July 2012. Additionally, the STC local branch in the governorate supported the Coalition’s role in countering smuggling activities.

However, the activity of the Southern military forces didn't have much impact as it was a limited role played by the “Backup and Support” Forces which later became an inactive one<sup>10</sup>. The STC seeks to establish the “Mahri Elite Forces” to secure Al-Mahra’s border crossings as well as to counter smuggling and terrorism similar to the successful role played by the Hadrami and Shabwani Elites in their areas<sup>11</sup>. But this currently looks unlikely and could be met with

<sup>7</sup> The Yemeni President issues a decision appointing Bakrit as governor of Al Mahra, the Saudi Press Agency ([spa.gov.sa](http://spa.gov.sa))

<sup>8</sup> Interview by the author with an official local source in Al Mahra, February 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Watch ([facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com))

<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted by the author with "Rami Al Kaldi", journalist from South Yemen, February, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> An interview conducted by the author with a local official source in Al Mahra, February 2022. Previous source.

tribal resistance like what happened when the UAE established a Mahri force consisting of 2000 soldiers to support local police and develop the public security sector in the governorate's districts<sup>12</sup>.

However, the STC in Al-Mahra called for introducing camps and training centers for the governorate's locals to participate in protecting, securing, maintaining stability and enabling Mahri people to manage and control the affairs of their governorate's institutions<sup>13</sup>.

In light of the general context, the scope of the Saudi forces in the governorate was extended in the governorate as they established various military locations under their supervision, and recruited about 2000 soldiers from the governorate's people divided into 4 batches each of which has 500 soldiers. Those forces were deployed, along with Saudi forces, in the Port of Nishtun in Al-Ghaydah, as well as in Haswain, Qishn, Sihut and other districts of Al-Mahra's coast. These locations lasted for 3 years<sup>14</sup>.

On Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020, "Mohammed Ali Yasser" was appointed a governor of Al-Mahra by a Presidential decree<sup>15</sup>. He held several positions in the former President "Saleh" era including the Leader of Al-Mahra branch of the Congress Party in 1995, a member of the National Dialogue Conference, a member of the Riyadh Conference. In 2015, Yasser was appointed as Al-Mahra's governor in 2015<sup>16</sup> before being later replaced by Bin Kedah.

In total, most of Mahri's agree that "Mohammed" is an acceptable figure in the society, and that the rate of congestion and tension in the governorate has been reduced since his appointment.

The decision to replace the governor was in conjunction with a military tension at the Shihan crossing on the border with Oman where a military convoy, affiliated with the Coalition and the Special Operations Forces, was attacked by a thermal rocket which killed an officer and injured 4 soldiers<sup>17</sup>. This deliberately aimed at targeting the Saudi military presence to resume smuggling operations in favor of the Houthis as the Saudis affected the interests of the smuggling networks by attempting to restore control over "Shahan crossing".

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<sup>12</sup> An interview conducted by the author with a press source in Al Mahra, February 2022.

<sup>13</sup> "Al-Mahra's STC demands that citizens be able to run the governorate ([almashhadalaraby.com](http://almashhadalaraby.com))

<sup>14</sup> Al-Mahra's STC demands that citizens be able to run the governorate ([almashhadalaraby.com](http://almashhadalaraby.com))

<sup>15</sup> A presidential decree to appoint Mohammed Ali Yasser as AlMahra Governor ([sabanew.net](http://sabanew.net))

<sup>16</sup> News and Reports - Who is the new Al Mahra's Governor.. And what did he say in his first comment on the decision to appoint him ([marsad.news](http://marsad.news))

<sup>17</sup> An attack on a convoy of the Arab Coalition in Al Mahra Governorate, Yemen ([almashareq.com](http://almashareq.com))

The dismissal of governor “Rajeh Bakrit” raised questions about its reasons, especially that he enjoyed close ties to the KSA. However, local sources attributed this to “disputes” among “Bakrit” and Prime Minister “Maeen Abdulmalik” and the Saudi Ambassador “Al Jaber” over financial aspects related to corruption<sup>18</sup>, specifically that “Shahan Crossing,” whose daily revenues estimated in millions, was controlled by the local authority led by “Bakrit”. The latter was directly accused of corruption by the Public Funds Prosecution which requested the “Central Bank Governor” to stop spending from the account dedicated to support the governorate<sup>19</sup> because he didn’t transfer the governorate’s revenues to the Central Bank.

Additionally, Bakrit’s mismanagement of the governorate and his reluctance to apply institutional work and relying upon certain figures increased congestion and tension under his leadership, which led to his dismissal at the end<sup>20</sup>.

It can be said that the general scene in Al-Mahra, which became more complicated during recent years, created a form of social divisions in the governorate which was famous for its strong tribal cohesion. The regional conflict has left its impact over its internal structure. There are some components and forces involved in the political tussles including for example: (Sit-in Committee, the General Council for the People Mahra and Socotra, the Gathering Council for the People of Al-Mahra and the local authority). All of those parties attempted to intensify their presence at different political and social levels which caused a state of instability due to several political positions most of which are directly related to the outside world.

Moreover, more than 70% of the tribal men in Al-Mahra hold other nationalities, top of which is the Saudi citizenship, followed by the Omani and the Emirati respectively<sup>21</sup>.

This in itself affected the idea of the national affiliation to a specific issue and made each party lean to the country he holds its nationality as a kind of alignment imposed on them by holding the second citizenship.

They risk losing their interests if they get out of the frame of such consent. Such a dilemma made each party facing two difficult choices, either to merge in the

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<sup>18</sup> An interview by the author with an official local source in Al Mahra, February 2022. Previous source.

<sup>19</sup> The Public Funds Prosecution, which is concerned with corruption issues, submits a memorandum to the Governor of the Central Bank, asking him to stop the transgressions of Al-Mahra’s Governor ([adengad.net](http://adengad.net)).

<sup>20</sup> The Public Funds Prosecution, which is concerned with corruption issues, submits a memorandum to the Governor of the Central Bank, asking him to stop the transgressions of Al-Mahra’s Governor ([adengad.net](http://adengad.net)).

<sup>21</sup> Interview by the author with an official local source from Al-Mahra, February 2022.

frame of his original country or to stick to the frames of his second nationality country, to protect it and adhere to its goals and projects.

The growing number of IDPs who resorted to Al-Mahra during the first years of the war raised doubts among some Mahri forces about intentional attempt to change the demographic structure of the governorate, or what they called “targeting the Mahri identity”<sup>22</sup>. For example, Al-Mahra city of Qishn in the beginning of 2018 witnessed a demonstration in which hundreds of women protested against the overflow of Yemeni displaced persons. They considered this a matter which has nothing to do with the humanitarian goals but threatens the demographic structure, peace and social coexistence<sup>23</sup>.

The STC branch in Al-Mahra always expresses their rejection to the systematic political displacement to change the population structure. It urged to stop the engineering architecture of lands and against building residential cities under the pretext of investment in order to bring citizens from North to the governorate<sup>24</sup>. These statements reflect what can be described as the STC adherence by the Mahra and Socotra Region Project as part of an independent federal Southern state according to its declared goals<sup>25</sup>.

## Saudi withdrawal

In late August 2021, the Saudi forces suddenly withdrew from military locations in the districts in the districts of "Sayhut and Al-Masila"<sup>26</sup>. This is followed by a half withdrawal from all the camps they had established along the coastal strip of the governorate including the Nishtun Port with the exception of little units as well as Sarfeet and Shahn border crossings with Oman<sup>27</sup>. The remaining forces are currently based in Al-Ghaydah Airport, but their presence is symbolic and does not have the former power and impact. However, the military almost daily trips in the Al-Ghaydah Airport are continuing<sup>28</sup>.

The parties which oppose the Saudi presence attributed the withdrawal of the forces to the growing pressure and the state of public anger against the existence of foreign forces in the governorate, as they called for the expelling the Saudi and British forces<sup>29</sup>. The latter came to eastern Yemen to pursue who

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<sup>22</sup> Al Mahra's STC" examines the implications of the demographic change scheme ([almashhadalaraby.com](http://almashhadalaraby.com))

<sup>23</sup> Al Mahra women demonstrate against the Yemeni settlement in the city of Qishn (photos) ([shabwaah-press.info](http://shabwaah-press.info))

<sup>24</sup> "Al-Mahra's STC demands that citizens be able to manage the governorate ([almashhadalaraby.com](http://almashhadalaraby.com))

<sup>25</sup> President Al Zubaidi: STC is the project of the whole south from Al Mahra to Bab Al Mandab ([stcaden.com](http://stcaden.com))

<sup>26</sup> Yemen.. Sources reveal the reasons for the Saudi forces' withdrawal from camps in Al-Masila and Sayhut in Al-Mahra ([sahafahn.com](http://sahafahn.com))

<sup>27</sup> Interview by the author with a journalist from Al Mahra, February 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Interview by the author with an official local source from Al Mahra, February 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Breaking news | Sudden withdrawal of Saudi forces from Al Mahra, AlNabaa Al Yemeni ([alnabba-alyemeni.net](http://alnabba-alyemeni.net))

are believed to carry out the drone attack against Tanker "Mercer Street" in the Arabian Sea on July 29<sup>th</sup> last year which killed a British security man and a Romanian employee. A British newspaper said that a secret team consisting of 40 persons arrived at the Al-Ghaydah Airport to detect who are behind the attack<sup>30</sup>.

The last justification of the withdrawal was based upon estimates related to the recent Saudi-Omani rapprochement. This looked as a suitable approach for both parties as Riyadh is likely keen not to irritate Oman by controlling the border crossings related with Muscat. In return, Oman will likely take into consideration Riyadh's concerns and would try to assure it, especially in terms of smuggling weapons to the Houthis.

Nonetheless, despite the Saudi withdrawal, the smuggling operations are still persistent although there have been available modern monitoring mechanisms. However, military observers believe that Oman turns a blind eye and provides facilities to smuggling operations through Al-Mahra in cooperation with internal parties close to the Houthis and connected with the network of the "Ali Salem Al-Huraizi"<sup>31</sup>.

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There have been no direct official Yemeni or Saudi accusations yet, of collusion of any kind. However, Saudi-Omani coordination is expected in terms of tightening measures and investigations especially after the attack on Abu Dhabi in mid-January by the Houthis which was condemned by a number of Al-Mahra elites and tribes in a statement<sup>32</sup>. They believe that the attack targeted the Arab national security in which they are part and a parcel of. They refuse shifting Al-Mahra into a theatre of conflicts and settling scores.

## Smuggling networks

Al-Mahra has witnessed a wide scale smuggling operation even before the entry of the Saudi forces in 2017. Those operations are being carried out through "Sarfeet and Shagan" crossings which are connected with Oman. Weapons shipments were detected inside trucks heading to Sanaa<sup>33</sup>. There were other smuggling routes which looked easier before being tightened by the Arab Coalition in 2019. One of them used the sea by passing from Iran through South

<sup>30</sup> Newspaper: British forces arrive in Yemen to pursue the Mercer Street attackers ([alarabiya.net](http://alarabiya.net))

<sup>31</sup> An interview conducted by the author with an official military source, who demanded anonymity for security reasons, February 2022.

<sup>32</sup> An important and urgent statement: The sheikhs of Al Mahra stress their support for the Arab coalition and against the Houthi militias and their tools | Ain al-Mahra ([ainalmahrah.com](http://ainalmahrah.com))

<sup>33</sup> Smuggling Houthi missiles through the Sarfeet border crossing with Oman - [YouTube](#)



Yemen's southern coasts, to reach the governorates of Al-Mahra and Hadramout which overlook the Arabian Sea, and unloading the shipments later to deliver it by land to Sanaa<sup>34</sup>. This matter condemns the areas under the control of "National Army" forces affiliated to Hadi's government, and raises a question about how those weapons arrive at the Houthis' areas of influence, especially that there are Yemeni military brigades in the governorate.

The Houthis relied on another smuggling route through commercial cargo ships which used to regularly transport to them heavy and strategic weapons, before being unloaded inside the sea and moving them through small boats to the governorate of Hodeidah and Raas Eissa<sup>35</sup>.

On July 16<sup>th</sup> 2019, the Coast Guards in Al-Mahra announced seizing a "boat" carrying a big amount of automatic weapons munitions on its way to the Houthis<sup>36</sup>. In April 2020, the Saudi led Coalition announced thwarting smuggling a shipment of Iranian weapons on board of a ship off Al-Mahra while also was on its way to the Houthis<sup>37</sup>. Those two detected attempts are just a tip of the iceberg of operations to provide the Houthis with weapons, drones and Ballistic missiles spare parts<sup>38</sup>.

According to a report issued by the UN Experts Committee<sup>39</sup>, the Houthis basically depend on Al-Mahra's crossings to smuggle weapons from Iran, in addition to the ports of Hodeidah in western Yemen. The smuggled Iranian weapons include thermal and surface-to-air missiles, as well as components of drones.

On Feb 11<sup>st</sup>, a soldier was killed, and 3 drivers were injured due to an ambush that targeted several locomotives carrying military equipment in Thamud in the Southern governorate of Hadramout. According to sources<sup>40</sup>, 30 containers carrying military equipment on board of the locomotives were on their way to the port of Nishtun in Al-Mahra towards the governorate of Marib to back forces affiliated with the Yemeni government, controlled by the Islah Party (Muslim Brotherhood) in the Northern governorate of Marib.

The timing of receiving such military equipment is dubious as this came days after the withdrawal of the Saudi forces from Al-Mahra's Nishtun Port. This

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<sup>34</sup> Learn about the arms smuggling routes to the Houthis [YouTube](#)

<sup>35</sup> Learn about the arms smuggling routes to the Houthis [YouTube](#)

<sup>36</sup> Yemeni Coast Guards thwart Iranian smuggling attempts ([almashareq.com](#))

<sup>37</sup> Weapons smuggling to Yemen.. Hidden trajectories to fuel conflict in the country | Independent Arabia ([independentarabia.com](#))

<sup>38</sup> Al Mahra: Grassroot Movement and a Regional Race ([south24.net](#))

<sup>39</sup> [Letter](#) dated 27 January 2020 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council

<sup>40</sup> Hadramout: Casualties in an attack on weapons locomotives heading to Marib ([south24.net](#))

raises speculations whether those military equipment were really heading to the "National Army" and why they didn't enter through "Al Wadia' border crossing" which connects Yemen and the KSA.

Parallely, official military parties<sup>41</sup> accused the Yemeni forces in Al-Mahra, which have close relations with what they call the "Muslim Brotherhood cells" backed by Turkey and Qatar, of supporting the operations of smuggling weapons to the Houthis including "Al-Huraizi" who is in harmony with the Houthis in many situations. This is especially after the Saudi forces withdrew from some of the open beaches of Al Mahra, with a length of 560 km, which facilitated a lot of smuggling of specific Houthi weapons and prohibited items.

In this regard, residents of Al-Mahra complain about the phenomenal spread of drugs and prohibited items which became massively prevalent in an unprecedented way by active smuggling networks. In late 2020, the Yemeni government announced that its affiliated Coast Guards in Al-Mahra detected a smuggling ship, on which they found 6 Iranian and Pakistani sailors and large amounts of drugs off Al-Ghayda coasts<sup>42</sup>. It also announced in the middle of last year targeting the homes and dens of suspects of drug use and promotion in Hafeef District in Al-Ghaydah<sup>43</sup>.

Mahri citizens describe the drug proliferation as being a negative and outlandish phenomenon in the society. This raises a question whether those measures of reducing smuggling weapons and prohibited items activities with all their forms in Al-Mahra are effective. The answer is related to how serious there is an adoption of measures which would protect the land and sea crossings from the smuggling networks in a way that secures Al-Mahra and other governorates used by suspicious networks as ways of smuggling.

## Al-Huraizi and the Houthis

The prominent tribal figure in Al-Mahra, Ali Salem Al-Huraizi, stirred much controversy. He is Former Deputy Governor of Al-Mahra and the Head of the "Peaceful Sit-in Committee" in Al-Mahra, which was established after the entry of the Saudi forces and called for their exit. Some dubbed him as Oman's First Man in Al-Mahra. He previously was the Commander of Al-Mahra Border Guards before being deposed in late Feb 2018.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview by the author with an official military source in Al Mahra, February 2022

<sup>42</sup> Sanaa.. 5 tons of cannabis (hashish) smuggled from the Public Prosecution Office and a deputy accuses the Houthis ([al-Arabiya.net](http://al-Arabiya.net))

<sup>43</sup> Successful security raids on drug dens in Al Mahra ([sabanew.net](http://sabanew.net))

Critics of Al-Huraizi argue that he has ties with the Houthis through smuggling weapons to them as a result of his previous experience in leading the Border Guards and his extended relationships with smugglers on the crossings. Al-Huraizi always praises the Houthis and their “valor” in resisting KSA. In an interview with the London-based newspaper "Rai Al-Youm", Al-Huraizi hailed the Houthis role in countering “Saudi greeds in Al-Mahra and Yemen in general”<sup>44</sup>.

Such a harmony is confirmed by tweets by Houthis leaders who praised Al-Huraizi’s role and described him as a “partner of struggle and destiny”<sup>45</sup>.

It is not a surprise that Al-Huraizi’s opponents repeatedly accuse him of having close relations with the Houthis. An official military source revealed to “South24” about intelligence information they had received three months before targeting the UAE about the presence of 22 Mahris in Sanaa, at the behest of Al-Huraizi, to take trainings about engineering, bombing and controlling drones. He added that those trusted information are dated back to the beginning of October 2021, and a copy of them was delivered to the Arab Coalition at this time<sup>46</sup>. Such statements are often understood in a way that Al-Huraizi can’t implement those daring steps by his own without cooperation or incentives from some party. It seems that the man's relationship with Muscat is strong, in addition to his clear links with Qatar and Turkey through the support he and his supporters receive for organizing demonstrations and protests against the Saudi presence on an ongoing basis in the governorate<sup>47</sup>.

At first sight, Al-Huraizi may appear as a hero as portrayed in the media outlets that oppose the Arab Coalition in Yemen. He opposes what he calls the “Saudi-Emirati occupation” although they no longer have a notable presence in the governorate. However, in a statement, some Mahri elites and tribes, disavowed “Al-Mahria TV Channel” which is based on Istanbul. They accused the channel of broadcasting incitements and lies against the Arab Coalition. They stressed that it does not represent Mahris and has nothing to do with the governorate<sup>48</sup>. This expressed the state of internal resentment against the policies adopted by

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<sup>44</sup> Sheikh Al-Huraizi for a London-based newspaper: Ansar Allah thwarted the Saudi schemes, and the latter resorted to forming the Red Sea Entity and it must be rejected | Yamanyoon ([yamanyoon.com](http://yamanyoon.com))

<sup>45</sup> Tweet by "Hussein Al Ezzi", Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Houthi government, February 4, 2022, [Twitter](https://twitter.com)

<sup>46</sup> An interview conducted by the author with an official military source, who asked for anonymity for security reasons regarding him and the source of information in Sanaa (in anticipation of the Houthi threats), February 2022.

<sup>47</sup> An interview conducted by the author with an official military source, who asked for anonymity for security reasons regarding him and the source of information in Sanaa (in anticipation of the Houthi threats), February 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Statement: The sheikhs of Al-Mahra Governorate confirm their support for the Arab coalition | Ain al-Mahra ([ainalmahrah.com](http://ainalmahrah.com))

such channels whose financiers often seek to fuel divisions and rifts in the governorate through close figures including Al-Huraizi.

As for the smuggling activities, some estimates indicate that unless the spread of military and security points in Al-Mahra and Hadramout, especially the First Military Region led by Vice President "Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar ", they could not have reached the Houthis. This reveals that there are facilities and protection delivered to these networks and even participating in carrying out their tasks. This can be connected with the complete harmony between the goals adopted by Al-Huraizi and those of the Muslim Brotherhood branch in the government of Hadi, which is close to Vice President who harnessed his media outlets and activists to back Al-Huraizi.

## The Omani role

Al-Mahra constitutes a strategic importance to Oman, as it is adjacent to its borders. The length of the border strip between Al-Mahra and the Omani governorate of Dhofar is 288 km, as it starts from the coast of the Hawf district and ends in the core of the desert on the border triangle between Yemen, Oman and Saudi Arabia<sup>49</sup>.

Oman has benefited from the economic recovery in Al-Mahra since the first months of the war, especially when the Arab Coalition imposed restrictions against the Houthi imports through the Port of Hodeidah. This pushed traders to use the land roads through Oman as an alternative<sup>50</sup>.

Oman tries to look as having a balanced relationship with all competing parties in Yemen. However, its activities during the recent years began to raise doubts and questions about the nature of its real role in the Yemeni crisis especially that it hosts Houthi leaders who practice political activities from Muscat and meet with regional officials and international ambassadors.

This contradicts Oman's total refusal to do political activities on its lands. For example, On May 22, 2009, Oman stripped the Omani citizenship from the former Southern leader "Ali Salem Al-Bidh" because he returned to political work without taking its permission. He was staying there as a political refugee since the 1994 War<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Ahmed Naji, Oman's Inflamed Border with Yemen - Carnegie Middle East Center - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ([carnegie-mec.org](http://carnegie-mec.org))

<sup>50</sup> Al Mahra: Where Regional Powers Determine Local Politics - Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies ([sanaacenter.org](http://sanaacenter.org))

<sup>51</sup> Because of his return to political work without permission... Oman strips citizenship from Salem Al Beidh ([dampress.net](http://dampress.net))

Based on such “selectivity” of the Omani policy, it can be said that the proclaimed Omani diplomacy and neutrality is diminishing especially in light of supporting political and tribal characters who adopt negative stances against the Hadi Government and the Arab Coalition. This thing has been clear through its relationships with the Houthis and latest policies in Al-Mahra. It is more likely that Riyadh's presence and its ties with the tribal smugglers which have been strengthened since 2017 became a source of obvious concern for Muscat.

Another of the Omani contradiction is shown through elements affiliated to Muscat and stand behind organizing protests that call to the exit of the Saudi forces, and incite against the establishment of KSA’s projects in Al-Mahra such as the “Oil Pipeline Project” which was supposed to extend from Al-Kharkhir area in the Saudi border, adjacent to Al-Mahra governorate, to the port of Nishtun overlooking the Arabian Sea.

However, the project is apparently may be shifted to Oman as the Omani Economy Minister “Saeed Al-Saqri” talked about the importance of activating the maritime connection between the KSA and Oman through a pipeline to the Arabian Sea without passing through the Strait of Hormuz<sup>52</sup>. This is the same project which was supposed to be established in Al-Mahra. Despite the denial by the “Sit-in Committee” headed by Al-Huraizi in the governorate by adding that they are not against extending the oil pipeline with certain conditions<sup>53</sup>, the project anyway began to vanish. This could reveal that one of Muscat's motives behind supporting Al-Huraizi whose stances posed much annoyance to the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra, is to shift the path of the Saudi oil pipeline to the Arabian Sea through Oman instead of Al-Mahra.

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<sup>52</sup> Omani Economy Minister: It is time to revive Saudi oil transport to the Arabian Sea | Middle East ([aawsat.com](http://aawsat.com))

<sup>53</sup> “The Saudi Oil Pipeline” ... Spokesperson for the Al-Mahra sit-in committee: We will not be an obstacle to any project that serves the country, and we will stand “against the violation of sovereignty” | Al Mahra Post ([almahrahpost.com](http://almahrahpost.com))



A map of the supposed oil pipeline path from Al-Kharkhir area in KSA, the Port of Nishtun overlooking the Arabian Sea in the governorate of Al-Mahra (Source: Debriefler, June 11st 2018)

In light of the extended Omani moves, military sources accuse Muscat of involvement in relationships with local smuggling networks that facilitate the entry of specific weapons to the Houthis through their adjacent crossings in Al-Mahra. Oman instructed those networks to reduce their activities between 2019-2021 which made the Saudi believe that Oman edited its policies<sup>54</sup> and encouraged them to later withdraw from Al-Mahra.

Based on this reality, and with the growing Houthi attacks, the US pressures push Oman to take strict measures against some illegal activities. However, for the KSA and other regional countries, Omani leniency towards the Houthis still constitutes a dilemma. Instead of involvement in diplomacy, which is the surface pretext behind the Houthi presence in Oman, the Houthis continues launching a regional “terrorism” campaign<sup>55</sup>.

At the end, it can be said that there is an urgent need for making understandings that could reduce the political tension in Al-Mahra, which emerged among 4 parties (the KSA, Oman, Qatar, the UAE) due to regional rivalry, although there were no military public Omani or Qatari presence in Al-Mahra. The negative

<sup>54</sup> An interview conducted by the author with an official military source

<sup>55</sup> FDD | Oman Must Isolate, Not Embrace, the Houthis ([fdd.org](http://fdd.org))

impact on some local parties was deep and obvious. The regional parties should not exploit their influence to stir disputes among the governorate's tribes or render it to a settling scores arena especially that this in turn allowed several local parties to engage with the regional competing parties. This in turn has impacted the stability of Al-Mahra which remained for a long time away from the war frontlines.

It is not clear yet how the situation in Al-Mahra will develop, on the political field or on the level of smuggling activities related with the military Houthi conditions. However, it is important for different local parties to gather around one negotiation table and hold a series of meetings that would produce agreements which maintains Al-Mahra's security and strengthens its social fabric which began to collapse due to the impact of the regional conflict and the demographic change. The governorate's people have to run their affairs by themselves away from the influence of the focus involved in the war in the other Yemeni areas. Undoubtedly, this is a decisive turning point for the Mahris, but dialogue is the most suitable approach currently to rearrange the house from inside.

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*Author's note: Most official sources in Al-Mahra requested anonymity for reasons related to the social and political complexities in the governorate which pose threats against their interests due to the sensitive information they provided "South24" with a sincere thanks and appreciation to them for this cooperation.*



# **Al-Mahra: Another Theatre of Tussles in the Complicated Yemeni War**



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